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QAnon: An Online Conspiracy Theory with Real-World Implications

Key Points

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Rideau Hall Incident

On July 2, 2020, Corey Hurren gained access to the grounds of Rideau Hall; he was in possession of firearms and allegedly threatened Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. As reported in the media, Hurren wrote a letter in which he stated that Canada required a "wake up call"; he also referenced the lack of parliamentary sittings and federal firearms legislation as grievances. Media also reported that Hurren posted messages referencing conspiracy theories, some of which included QAnon hashtags. s.38

QAnon is a meta-conspiracy theory¹ which, according to researchers, was first referenced in October 2017 on the anonymous image board 4Chan. At its core, the narrative alleges that US President Donald J. Trump is engaged in a battle against a global elite ("The Deep State") which aims to keep the people of the world poor, ignorant and enslaved. QAnon adherents believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is a myth orchestrated by "The Deep State" that was created primarily to harm Trump's re-election campaign. s.38

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Online Reaction

The Rideau Hall incident resonated with individuals online. Social media posts painted Hurren

¹ A meta-conspiracy theory combines multiple narratives into a consolidated narrative using its own vernacular. s.38

as a hero for trying to kill Trudeau; portrayed Trudeau as a dictator; and lamented Hurren's lack of success. One post proclaimed the hope that the next incident will bring the "great awakening", a QAnon vernacular term for abolishing the existing political and economic system. Examples of such postings are visible on page one. s.38

Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation During the Pandemic

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s.38 the manifestation of this trend in several ways—from a sudden spike in hate crimes against Chinese or immigrants to attacks against critical infrastructure, including telecommunications masts. s.38
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The pandemic particularly accelerated the spread of QAnon online. According to a recent social media analysis, QAnon has seen a 71% increase in Twitter content and a 651% increase in Facebook content since March 2020. Another study shows that the number of visits to qmap.pub, a website that catalogues QAnon's posts, had more than 10.5 million hits in May 2020, compared to 4.1 million in January. s.38
A Canadian researcher has recently conducted an estimate of QAnon resonance on Facebook. The study concluded that there are approximately 179 Facebook QAnon groups with more than 1.4 million members and 120 QAnon pages with a total of 911,000 page likes. The academic also highlighted the international scope of the narrative, as there was ample evidence of dedicated efforts to create QAnon propaganda in many different languages. Media articles are also reporting an expansion of QAnon outside of North America to countries such as Germany, France and Australia. s.38

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From the Internet to Real-World Violence

While most adherents are not violent and generally limit their involvement to furthering the conspiracy online, some real-world events have involved serious violence, including murder and kidnapping. For example, a QAnon follower pleaded guilty to a terrorism charge and aggravated assault after blocking the Hoover Dam in Nevada with a homemade armoured vehicle in 2018. More recently, in March 2020, a female QAnon follower was arrested in New York City after posting threatening messages about former Vice President Joe Biden and former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton on Facebook. She was later charged with multiple counts of criminal possession of a weapon. In Germany, Tobias Rathjen killed nine people on February 19, 2020. While he had racist beliefs, he was also influenced by anti-government conspiracy theories overlapping with the QAnon narrative. s.38

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Outlook

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